Everything I Never Told My Parents

Most of us try to keep track of our kids. The research says we'd do better getting them to talk.

When I was young, I kept a journal. It knew everything: the things I was ashamed of, the things that scared me, and all the things I would never have told my mum and dad.

Kids don't write much in journals anymore. They carry phones. A 2023 survey found that 91 per cent of Australian 14- to 17-year-olds owned one. One-third of 6-12 year olds own one.

So we do what parents in the technology age do; we share locations, check screen time, and the tried and tested asking them where they're going, who they're going with, and what time they'll be home.

But these tech strategies, even when combined with the old-school questioning, tells us remarkably little. A blue dot on a map shows you *where* your daughter is. It says nothing at all about *how* she is.

In 2000, two Swedish researchers asked parents what they know about what their kids are up to, and *how* they know? Håkan Stattin and Margaret Kerr surveyed 703 fourteen-year-olds and their parents, and found three sources of parental knowledge. Kids openly disclose things to you. They just tell you. Alternatively, you ask them, seeking information as best you can. Lastly, some parents set rules that require the kids to report in. In their research and several subsequent studies it was only the first one that carried real weight. Open disclosure that is *not* coerced is the key. On the more bleak side, the *less* children disclosed of their own accord, the more likely they were to be breaking rules and having contact with police - which is never a good sign.

Boundaries still matter of course! But most of what you know about your children is what they have chosen to tell you.

Here's how to build a family where the children choose to chat with you about their lives rather than - as I did - hide it (on their phone, in their journal, or just in their head).

1 Manage your face

Your reaction is the whole ballgame. Kids tell us things in proportion to how safe it felt the last time they told us something. Breathe before you speak. Then say "thanks for telling me", especially when what you've just heard makes your stomach drop.

2 Get curious, not furious

When the news is bad, the instinct is to read the riot act. Ask instead: "How did you feel?" "What happened next?" We manage this easily when our kids come home with good news. The skill is doing it when they don't.

3 Separate the telling from the trouble

If honesty comes at a price (and means punishment), children stop being honest. Receive the disclosure warmly. Deal with the behaviour later, once everyone is calm as a problem-solving process rather than a punishment. Children need to learn that coming to you makes things better.

4 Give reasons, not just rules

When it's time to work out how to make sure this doesn't happen again, don't lay down the law. "Because I said so" invites pushback. Explain your thinking. Ask for their reaction. Offer choices where you can. Teenagers who feel trusted keep fewer secrets, and teenagers who feel controlled keep more.

5 Go easy on the snooping

If your kids discover you've been reading their messages, you've taught them two things: that you don't trust them, and that you'll find out anyway. You've just removed both of their reasons to tell you anything.

My journal kept my secrets beautifully. But it never once gave me a hug, talked me down, or told me I'd be okay. It can be good to process, but sometimes a conversation about what's going on matters more. When it comes to my kids, I'm focused on building a relationship with them where they *want* to have a chat about their struggles, mistakes, and fears. I'd rather my daughters came to me than anyone else (or any*thing* else - AI, I'm looking at you).

Location apps show you *where* your kids are. Only the relationship tells you *how* they are.

Our kids face challenges. They're up to the task if they've got you behind them.



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